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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 GABORONE 000025

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SUBJECT: BRITISH VIEWS ON BOTSWANA, ZIMBABWE

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Philip R. Drouin for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (C) Summary: Charge d'Affaires and A/DCM met with the British High Commissioner to Botswana Frank Martin January 7 at his office. The meeting was a continuation of long standing close cooperation and information sharing between the U.S. Embassy and UKHC in Gaborone. Martin recently returned to Botswana from vacation, and wanted an opportunity to exchange views with his American counterpart on current events in Botswana and the region. He briefed the Charge on President Khama's November visit to London before exchanging views on Botswana-Zimbabwe relations. End Summary.

Khama in London

12. (C) High Commissioner Martin helped to organize and was present for President Khama's November 26-27 official visit to the United Kingdom, during which he met with the Queen and senior British government officials. Martin noted with some surprise that President Khama shunned all attempts to raise the profile of the visit by doing media interviews or involving the press. He tried to keep his visit to the UK as private as possible. Martin said that Foreign Minister Skelemani did some media outreach, including his appearance on the BBC program Hard Talk, during the London trip. Many of Khama's discussions in London focused on the crisis in neighboring Zimbabwe, and he expressed his concern that the African Union and other international players may have to exert additional pressure on SADC to break the impasse regarding a way forward in Zimbabwe. Martin highlighted some interesting comments President Khama made while addressing a group of British parliamentarians. According to the UKHC, Khama told the British MPs that he never wanted to be a politician, but that he entered government out of a sense of public service. Khama went so far as to say that after spending 10 years as Vice President, he may only wish to serve one five-year term as President so that he can "get on with the rest of his life." Khama also discussed the impact of the global financial crisis on Botswana. He indicated that Debswana had sold no diamonds in November 2008 and was expected to only make \$50 million in December. The President acknowledged that the decline in diamond and other mineral revenues will be difficult for the GOB, and indicated that the GOB is studying ways to cut expenditures and draw on its healthy foreign exchange reserves to weather the storm.

Botswana/Zim Matters

13. (C) The High Commissioner told us that he met January 6 with Botswana MFA Deputy Permanent Secretary Sesara George, who told him that Vice President Merafhe and Foreign Minister Skelemani are scheduled to represent the GOB at the African

Union meeting in Addis in late January/early February. They also discussed Zimbabwe issues at length. Per Sesara George, MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai received a "full validity passport" from the Government of Zimbabwe just around Christmas. George told Martin that he had "seen the passport with his own eyes" and that it was full validity and unrestricted. (Note: He did not specify whether it was a tourist or diplomatic passport.) The UKHC reports that the passport was delivered to Tsvangirai while he was in Maun by someone from the South African High Commission in Botswana. George told HC Martin that Tsvangirai subsequently left Botswana on December 30 to vacation in Cape Town with his family. (Note: Martin was unaware of the rumored MDC meeting to be held in South Africa January 5-7. End Note.) Deputy Permanent Secretary George assured Martin that Morgan Tsvangirai has no plans at this point to return to Botswana as a resident, and indicated that Tsvangirai would continue on to Zimbabwe after his vacation in South Africa. The High Commissioner told us that Deputy P.S. George "was quite clear on this point" and stressed that though Tsvangirai may be in Botswana from time to time for ad hoc meetings or consultations, he would be returning to Zimbabwe.

¶4. (C) The High Commissioner mentioned that Tsvangirai had been talking in early December about organizing an international "Friends of Zimbabwe" meeting to be held in Gaborone in early 2009. However, Martin believes that this meeting has been put on hold by both the GOB and the MDC out of concerns that it would signal that the MDC has fully abandoned the September powersharing agreement. (Note: The GOB may also be skittish about hosting such a provocative

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conference right next door to its neighbor with which it enjoys sour if not hostile relations just now. End Note.) The High Commissioner Martin mentioned that he has heard rumors about a possible SADC Extraordinary Summit on Zimbabwe to be held later this month.

¶5. (C) Deputy Permanent Secretary George told HC Martin that the GOB provided a truckload of water treatment chemical directly to the GOZ on Christmas day. In addition, the GOB said that it gave the Red Cross three 10-ton trucks worth of medical supplies to fight the cholera epidemic. These supplies were provided around December 31. The GOB estimated that both the chemicals and medical supplies are worth 1.5 million pula (approximately USD 200,000). This donation is reportedly in addition to the 3 million pula of humanitarian assistance the GOB pledged for Zimbabwe in early December ¶2008. The Government also told the UKHC that they increased the pace of deportations of illegal migrants from Zimbabwe around the holidays. Sesara George told the High Commissioner that approximately 1000 Zimbabweans were deported from Botswana around Christmas. George also mentioned to the UKHC that the GOB has arrested several "CIO operatives" for clandestine activities inside Botswana, but refused to elaborate on how many people had been arrested or the nature of their activities.

Comment

¶6. (C) Comment: Khama's statement in London that "he looks forward to getting on with the rest of his life" and may only serve one term would come as a shock to most observers here in Botswana. Though he shuns the limelight and avoids media encounters at home and abroad, Khama is seen here as a natural if somewhat stern leader, and he is fully expected to follow Botswana's tradition of serving two terms in office and then handing over power to his Vice President. (Note: We expect that current VP Merafhe is merely a place-holder, given his age, and that after the 2009 General Elections he will be replaced. End Note.) It would shake up the Botswana elite if Khama announced that he does not intend to seek a second term. It remains to be seen whether his statement in Britain was merely wishful thinking on his part, or reflects

a serious intention to retire earlier than expected. We should also note that Khama has not yet been elected to his first term as President! The ruling Botswana Democratic Party is of course widely expected to easily win the October 2009 general election, at which point the party is expected to install Khama as President.

17. (C) Comment Continued: We found it interesting that Sesara George was so adamant to the British that Morgan Tsvangirai will not return to live in Botswana. He has been resident in Gaborone for at least a month, and perhaps the GOB has grown tired of hosting him at the government's guest house here in the capital. Tsvangirai told assembled journalists at his December 19 press conference in Gaborone that he would return to Zimbabwe once he received his passport, so it now remains to be seen whether he will keep that promise. The GOB continues to play a helpful role regarding Zimbabwe. Botswana's humanitarian contributions to its neighbor are laudable, especially in the context of the global economic downturn. Botswana's government is heavily dependent on revenues from Debswana's diamond sales as well as tourism and other base metal mining. The mining and tourism sectors are expected to be hit hard by the global recession, and GOB revenue is likely to decline significantly in 2009. End Comment.
DROUIN